

NSC BRIEFING

DOCUMENT NO. 2829  
NO CHANGE IN CLASS. 1  
DECLASSIFIED  
CLASS. CHANGED TO: TS S C  
NEXT REVIEW DATE: \_\_\_\_\_  
AUTH: HR 70-2  
DATE 1-16-80 REVIEWER: LAGE 14

30 April 1957

- I. After a long period of relative quiet, the Communist Pathet Lao in early April intensified their military activities in Laos' two disputed northern provinces of Laos--San Houa and Phong Saly.
  - A. Pathet attacks have forced the Royal Army to abandon at least three forward positions.
  - B. Two of the attacks--involving 200-300 Pathets--are the largest military actions in recent months.
  - C. Pathets appear to have been stiffened by the re-entry into northern Laos of some Viet Minh cadres and weapons withdrawn in 1956.
- II. Royal Army tactics have been confined to preserving their present positions and limited local attacks recapturing those which had been lost.
  - A. Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma--who is also Minister of Defense--desires for political reasons to avoid intensification of conflict in north.
  - B. Royal chief of staff, while reportedly disgruntled by Souvanna's failure to give him clear-cut directives to counter Pathet Military pressure, nonetheless does not intend to mount a general offensive against the Pathets unless size of rebel attacks increases.
  - C. The Royal government has moved one battalion (750 men) from central Laos to reinforce its 3,000-man force in San Houa. (Pathets have estimated 4,500 there).

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D. Gov't is also somewhat outnumbered in Phong Saly, where there are only 1,500 Royal troops against an estimated Pathet total of 1,800.

III. Expansion of Pathet military activity appears designed primarily to strengthen rebel position at bargaining table.

A. Pathets have been hard at work for months on political program, trying to win mass support for rebel place in coalition government.

B. Brit. ambassador, just finishing 1,000 mi. trip south Laos, struck by extent popular sympathy for Pathets.

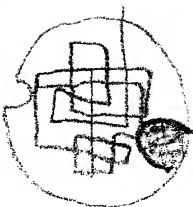
C. Summer rainy season begins in May, making supply in north difficult and probably precluding major rebel military effort.

IV. With opening of Laotian national assembly on 11 May, pace of political developments is expected to quicken.

A. Evidence is mounting that Premier Souvanna Phouma plans to resign if he fails to settle Pathet problem before assembly meets.

B. Souvanna's resignation (or overthrow) would probably precipitate prolonged cabinet crisis, since there is no leader assured of sufficient support to form new government.

C. Rivalry continues between Deputy Premier Katay and Independent Party leader Phoui Sananikone—the two most powerful leaders in the Assembly. In showdown, they would probably cancel each other out.



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D. Both Royal Army and the throne reportedly would oppose ambitious Prince Petsarath as a candidate for premiership:

he is believed unlikely to make an early bid for the post.

V. Mid-Apr US-UK-French note to Laotian Gov't, supporting reunification of Laos while opposing the granting of dangerous concessions to Pathets, appears to have been well-received in political circles.

A. According to our embassy, the Pathet delegation in Vientiane is now "coming in for more direct criticism" and "cooler treatment" at social events.

B. Indian and Polish members of International Control Mission are threatening to press for ICC resolution denouncing this example of Western "interference".